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ABSTRACT

A conceptual framework of the adjustment to parenthood as a developmental stage in which parents are faced with a wide range of complex tasks in several social systems is described. Results are presented of an extensive longitudinal study of of 64 mothers and 57 husbands during the first year with a new baby. Results indicated that parents become more relaxed and self-confident as their babies become livelier and more responsive, and the marital relationship shows increasing strain. Trends which reflect the changing demands in the ongoing process of adjustment for new parents are discussed. (Author)

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Longitudinal Changes in the Adjustment to Parenthood

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Longitudinal Changes in the Adjustment to Parenthood

For over 20 years there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the transition to parenthood constitutes a crisis for most new parents (LeMasters, 1957; Dyer, 1963) or is merely mildly stressful (Hobbs, 1965; Hobbs and Cole, 1976; Meyerowitz and Feldman, 1966, Russell, 1974). In this debate, the transition has been treated as primarily involving the adoption of a new set of roles. This view of the transition obscures the fact that the infant changes rapidly during the first years, and merely successfully adopting the new roles will not insure adequate reciprocal adjustment of all the family members to each other. In addition, it generally does not take into account that the adjustment to parenthood involves a stage in the adult development of the new parents in which they are faced with resolving issues concerning the nature of their own identity and growth.

In order to understand the process of adjustment to parenthood, it is necessary to go beyond merely labeling the transition period as a crisis or not a crisis and beyond enumerating the stresses. We view the adjustment to parenthood as a complex, transactional process rather than as an end state. Thus the present study was conceived to be a broad, longitudinal exploration of the changing patterns of adjustment of the family members during the first year after the

birth of the baby. In this paper, we present our conceptual framework for our study of the changing adjustment to parenthood, and the results of our study of changes during the first year of parenting.

Having a baby is viewed here as a disruption of the existing balances in the family system and its relation to the environment. (Kopf, McFadden, 1974; LeMasters, 1957). It constitutes a developmental stage in the life cycle of the individuals (Erickson, 1963; Titus, 1976), the marital and parent-infant dyads, and the family system. As such, it precipitates a wide range of developmental issues -- forces to be integrated, tasks to be met, or problems to be solved in order to develop to a more integrated stage of functioning (Raush, Goodrich and Campbell, 1976). According to Duvall (1971), "family developmental tasks are those growth responsibilities that must be accomplished at a given stage of development in a way that will satisfy the family's (1) biological requirements, (2) cultural imperatives, and (3) personal aspirations and values, if the family is to continue to grow as a unit. There are developmental issues in relation to the self, the marital dyad, the parent- infant dyad, and the larger community. The adjustment to parenthood involves the balancing and integrating of the solutions to the developmental issues in these interrelated systems.

In the present study we explored how the parents' perceived functioning in several systems change during the first year of parenting.

Extensive questionnaire data was gathered for 64 new mothers and 57 of their husbands at three points (a) an average of three months postpartum, (b) six weeks later, (3) approximately eight months postpartum. Couples were contacted through expectant parent education classes and were predominantly white, middle-class, educated, in their late 20's, and married for about four years. A wide range of measures were assessed: (a) self: General Well-Being (Dupuy, 1973), Personal Feelings (Wessman and Ricks, 1966); (b) parental-baby: Parental Sense of Competence (Gibaud-Wallston, 1977), Parental Attitudes (Cohler, Weiss and Grunebaum, 1970), Baby Temperament (Carey, 1973), father participation; (c) marital: Dayadic Adjustment (Spanier, 1976), Positive and Negative Marital Interaction (Feldman, 1971), Sex Role Ideology (Hoffman, 1960), Husband help in household tasks.

In general, parents reported predominantly positive feelings toward themselves, their babies, and their spouses. Yet, especially for mothers, there were many significant changes over the six months. Mothers increased significantly in feelings of self-confidence and energy and decreased in anxiety. Fathers increased in self-cofidence and feelings of elation and fullness of life. Mothers and fathers describe their babies as becoming significantly more happy, active and distractible. Mothers report a significant increase in their feeling of skill and knowledge as a parent and of their husband's participation

in baby care. In contrast to the increase in positive feeling toward self and baby, the marital relationship decreases in quality. Wives show a decrease in overall satisfaction, frequency of laughing together and sharing feelings. For husbands the trend in this direction is not significant. Fathers show a significant movement toward a more traditional view of the husband-wife division of labor. Both husbands and wives report a decrease in feeling loved.

The results are discussed in terms of the ongoing process of adjustment to parenthood and the complexity of integrating and balancing the new relationships. Although most parents report generally positive feelings by the third month postpartum, they continue to adapt and adjust to the changing demands. As the baby becomes livelier and more responsive, the parents feel more relaxed and confident of themselves. However, the baby continues to compete with the marital relationship for time and feelings, and the parents are faced with defining new ways to meet their own needs for love and expression of feelings. The new parent must continue to deal with these developmental tasks in order for the adjustment to parenthood to become a time for psychological and emotional growth. The complexity and range of the changes supports the need for a broad framework examining several systems to study the adjustment to parenthood.

Table 1

Changes in the Adjustment of Mothers and Fathers

Scale[d]	Range	Mothers (N=54) Administration 1 x̄	2 x̄	3 x̄	F	Fathers (N=47) Administration 1 x̄	2 x̄	3 x̄	F
Self									
Fullness of Life	(2-13)	9.60	10.16	9.76	2.09	9.21	9.58	9.91	2.18
Energy	(4-29)	19.85[a]	21.52[b]	21.38[b]	3.79*	21.58	22.41	21.85	0.89
Relaxation	(3-23)	14.38[a]	15.73[b]	15.26	2.90	14.84	15.76	15.44	2.02**
Health	(2-15)	11.27	12.09	12.08	2.09	10.26[a]	12.03[b]	11.04[a]	6.86**
Positive Mood	(3-23)	18.20	18.85	18.37	1.12	18.15	18.17	18.70	0.65
Parental Dyad									
Parental Sense of Competence									
Skill/Knowledge		32.17[a]	34.85[b]	35.30[b]	12.56**	31.60	32.03	32.33	0.49
Comfort/Valuing		38.05[a]	41.35[b]	41.15[b]	12.49**	37.93[a]	40.94[b]	41.22[b]	11.24**
Baby Temperament									
High Activity	(3-9)	7.14[a]	7.35[b]	7.79[b]	7.51**	7.00	7.37	7.45	2.20
Fussy Mood	(3-9)	4.22[b]	3.52[a]	3.82[c]	7.76**	4.25[a]	3.63[b]	3.88[b]	4.89**
Not Distractable	(2-6)	3.27[a]	2.64[b]	2.38[b]	16.64**	3.01[a]	2.95[a]	2.62[b]	2.03
Marital Dyad									
Dyadic Adjustment									
Concensus	(13-78)	62.90		62.60	0.37	61.01		61.10	0.20
Affective Expression	(4-16)	12.96		12.77	0.55	12.81		12.83	0.01
Satisfaction	(10-54)	51.46		50.48	4.94*	50.90		49.65	4.09*
Cohesion	(5-29)	22.13		21.85	0.77	21.32		20.91	0.73
Husband Help	(6-30)	15.20	15.07	14.58	2.95	16.03	15.94	15.84	0.13
Father Participation	(3-15)	6.34[a]	6.77[a]	7.53[b]	10.66**	6.41[a]	7.08[b]	7.59[b]	7.61**
Egalitarian Ideology	(4-20)	14.46	14.73	14.29	2.36	14.73[a]	14.71	14.15[b]	2.87
Social Support									
Companionship	(1-8)	6.83[a]	6.55	6.37[b]	3.58*	6.44	6.48	6.66	0.96

[a,b,c] Means with different subscripts are significantly different from each other p<.05 on Newman-Keuls test. Means without subscripts or with same subscript are not significantly different. [d] scale titles reflect high end of range. * p<.05 ** p<.01.

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